

Thursday,  
12-8-05

This trip was a near mirror image of the first one, with the happy exception that we did not contribute to global air pollution by creating any foul-smelling miasma of Spanish beans and rice-induced flatulence anywhere along the way. My buddy Craig (who used to live on Oahu with me but now lives at altitude near Denver) and I got picked up at the Hilo airport by mutual friend Ken. This very cool pal had already secured fuel for my alcohol stove and immediately took us to get our permit, stopping on the way only for a few more absolutely essential supplies (Hershey's chocolate and Pringle's chips if memory serves.) Upon signing in, we met with Ranger Kupono McDaniel who was the bomb with information and getting us going in a timely manner. We were informed that we were the only two scheduled to do the main hike that day, something that pleased us to no end. Both Ken and Kupono told us how it had been storming as late as Wednesday, the day before we arrived and indeed, the summit of Mauna Loa was blanketed in white, possibly down to 10,000'. However, we ended up with three days of perfect hiking weather. So, armed with proper warnings and a request for trail and cabin information updates, we drove on up to the trailhead at the terminus of Mauna Loa Road at 6600'.

We hit the trail in the vicinity of 11:00 a.m. Though the trail begins in a forested area, it is not long at all before the trees give way to shrubs and tufts of grass. Soon, even the shrubbery falls away and by the time we neared the Red Hill cabin, there was very little flora at all. Having experienced this trail once before and hence more secure in the knowledge that we'd make the cabin with daylight to spare, this time we spent a little more time digging the work of Mother Nature and Madame Pele.

We made Red Hill in about 6 hours and got settled in. This cabin gets a lot more use as evidenced by the conditions of the bunk pads, some of which are getting a bit ratty. This is not a criticism, only a report. By having the foam already there, we did not have to schlep up our Thermarests. We also checked on the water. There is an overflow PVC pipe and when I looked inside and tapped the side of the barrel, I could see the water ripple, so the water level was very high. Since it gets used more and replenished by fresh precip, the water also looks pretty good, though I always either boil, filter or both. Though drinking the water straight probably would be just fine, a few minutes of purifying is worth keeping the "pahoe hoe trots" at bay.

Craig and I had ramen and summer sausage then played two hands of a card game called Hand and Foot, a contest resembling Rummy on steroids and very much like Canasta except that it has lots of unnecessary arcane rules which someone created probably just to brag that they had invented a new game. Sort of like rhythmic gymnastics or synchronized swimming, eh? We split the two games during which we ingested a prodigious number of Hershey's Chocolate Nuggets. After the second game, it was time to hit the hay and though it got cold outside, the cabin was quite nice and my 15 degree REI mummy was so warm that I often unzipped it halfway.

Friday, 12-9-05

We got going at 8:15 and made really good time for the first five miles or so. Still, we took more time than the previous trip to take pics, view the open pits and lava tubes right along the trail and

generally dig the mountain. As Thursday wore on, we could see the snow retreating, so we did not meet any till midday Friday. It was right about 11,000 feet that the first icicles and tiny patches appeared. They grew steadily, so that soon we were able to munch on handfuls which at the time was quite refreshing but it ended up having a sneaky adverse effect on Craig later.

Our pace began to slow about six miles in and slowly but steadily decreased the higher we went. No matter how much I train here on Oahu, we just cannot replicate the altitude. I've also done Haleakala eight times and while it is one of the most special places on earth, the mountain is just a smidge over 10,000' and much of the hiking is done between 6,000' and 8,000', so the altitude has never gotten to me there. Above 10,000' things get a little tougher, so the 8 to 12 hour estimates for making the Mauna Loa cabin are pretty accurate and as we read in the logbook, some people take even longer.

I can't remember when exactly we hit the crater, but the sun wasn't all that high. As we began the final two miles to the cabin (the final two miles of our 2004 38-mile Yosemite high country trek weren't any tougher) we were beat, the sun was descending rapidly, the wind had picked up and we were now above 13,000'. My GPS confirmed that the 2 mile distance is accurate but in those conditions, we swore that it was longer. The snow was fairly deep in places, maybe two feet or so and obscuring the trail on occasion, especially in places that were in shadow and with the increasing wind, it was getting pretty darn chilly. Finally, I saw the cabin not that far in the distance but at the time, it seemed like miles.

I arrived about five minutes ahead of Craig at 5:45, so we did the second day in 9 hours 30 minutes. First thing upon arriving (the sun had gone down only seconds earlier), I blessedly dropped my pack and checked out the water. It came out a dark rust color, not anything like the Red Hill reserve. However, it seemed to come out briskly which led me to believe that there was a good supply, so I let it run for a liter or so and it cleared up reasonably. I replenished our depleted water supply and Craig arrived a couple minutes later.

We started to unpack but realized that we were so beat, we just wrapped ourselves in our bags and rested while trying to get warm. I sat in a chair (didn't want to fall asleep) in my bag for an hour till I felt good enough to go about heating water and making dinner. I decided to eschew the water supply and simply melt snow since there was tons of the stuff around, and it worked pretty well and tasted great! Craig actually began to feel pretty badly and slept off and on. I thought he might have altitude sickness so I required him to drink lots of water, rest, stay warm and take some aspirin. As it turned out, he was dehydrated and after lots of water and a few hours rest, he was good as new. In retrospect, he drank surprisingly little water that day, due probably to the comfortable hiking conditions and the constant snow munching which makes you feel like you're fine but does little to hydrate you. Sneaky white stuff.

I checked my watch thermometer about 10:00 p.m., and it read 34 degrees Fahrenheit ..... inside the cabin.

Saturday, 12-10-05

We awoke and set about doing the normal things to get ready for our final day which includes

employing the famous Mauna Loa cabin lua. I had forgotten the particulars of the trail down to the observatory, so we left midmorning to give us enough time to finish ahead of our pickup by Ken. The views of Mauna Kea on the way down are spectacular, and the hike itself, after the trials of the second day is exceptionally easy and fun. The 5.6 miles flew by, so much so that we spent over an hour just cruising by the campsite area about a mile before the observatory. I read the account of another hiker who described the appearance of the observatory on the horizon as "a scene from a science fiction movie", and I tend to agree.

We made the tiny parking lot by 2:15 or 2:30 and our ride was not scheduled to arrive till 4:00, so we lazed around, did a few half-hearted explorations and attempted the latest Los Angeles Time crossword. Finally, Ken arrived and we made our way back to Hilo where we had just enough time to muscle down a few slabs of pizza before the last flight back home to Oahu.